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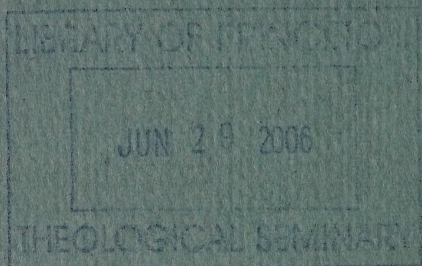
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# **Pursuit of MOBY DICK**

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**GERHARD FRIEDRICH**





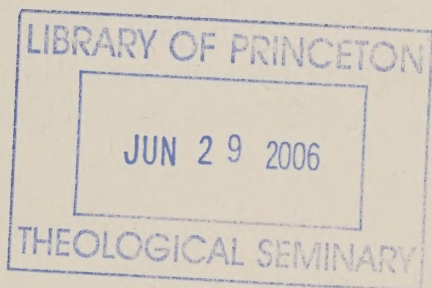
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In Pursuit of Moby Dick

# In Pursuit of MOBY DICK

*Melville's Image of Man*

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GERHARD FRIEDRICH



PENDLE HILL • WALLINGFORD PENNSYLVANIA

*About the author /* GERHARD FRIEDRICH teaches American literature at Haverford College. He was born in Germany, where he joined the Society of Friends and refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Hitler government. He studied at Guilford College, the University of North Carolina, Columbia University, Haverford College, and the University of Minnesota, and has written on Emerson, Dreiser, and Joyce. A recently published book of his poems is entitled *The Map Within the Mind*.

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Herman Melville was born in New York City in 1819 and died there in 1891. During an eventful four-year voyage into the Pacific, January 1841 to October 1844, he gathered the varied impressions which were soon converted into a sequence of five striking and searching novels, namely:

*Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846);

*Omoo: A Narrative of Adventure in the South Seas* (1847);

*Mardi: A Voyage Thither* (1849);

*White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850); and, most important,

*Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851).

A good edition of *Moby Dick* is the one edited by Willard Thorp (New York, Oxford University Press, 1947).

## POSTSCRIPT TO *MOBY DICK*

The great albino whale is on the loose,  
As when the Pequod chased him round the world.  
And many a line will turn into a noose  
And strangle the harpooner who had hurled  
The leveled lance. And many a daring boat  
Will be stove in and changed into a hearse.  
And many a fervent prayer and a gloat  
Will prove a final judgment and a curse.

We have our Ahabs and Fedallahs yet  
Who search the seven seas for Moby Dick.  
But what they would destroy, that they beget,  
Defeated by their own disastrous trick.  
And Starbuck only, in the dead of night,  
Sees far beyond the doom Nantucket Light.

Reprinted from the author's  
*The Map Within the Mind*  
(New York, Exposition Press, 1957)



"I see a Whale in the South-sea  
drinking my soul away."

SO WROTE WILLIAM BLAKE, the English mystic, in his prophetic poem entitled *America* (1793). It is a startling observation, and makes indeed an extraordinarily pertinent motto for, and a succinct summary of, Herman Melville's voluminous masterpiece *Moby Dick* (1851), even though Melville himself appears not at all to have known the quotation, since he failed to include it among the many topical "Extracts" which form part of an ingenious prelude to his chief work. Blake's clairvoyant statement can even be read as a diagnosis of Melville's own condition. Speaking through the mask of Ishmael, Melville voiced the conviction that, "as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!" The words have the soul-saving urgency of an ancient mariner's confession.

Melville knew the stark reality of a whaling life by personal experience, and so he could not have indiscriminately jubilated, as Walt Whitman did after him: "O the whaleman's joys!" His view of existence anticipated rather the horrors of two World Wars and their manifest failure to make the world safe for democracy. The fame of *Moby Dick*, the dire sense of its relevance, is thus understandably

rather young, being a matter of only one or two generations. To anyone who reads *Moby Dick* in the context of the mid-twentieth century—reads it from beginning to end—it should almost certainly be an immensely disturbing experience. For this whale of a book, which may well be the greatest single achievement of imaginative American literature, projects the symbolic story of an injured man—maimed, as it were, in the process of whale-hunting by a ferocious albino specimen—whose determination to avenge his loss leads him and a cosmopolitan crew halfway around the world into apocalyptic disaster. Even the action of Melville's account alone is moving and tragic enough to shake the easy assumptions most people live by, but the author leaves no doubt as to his essential concern with the fact that, in the language of Genesis, "God created great whales." He places these words, together with other Biblical quotations, at the top of his "Extracts" preceding the story proper. Moreover, quoting Hakluyt, he informs us that it is "the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word"; that "leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, . . . you deliver that which is not true"; and ranging between the capitals of Heaven and Hell, his not-so-fictional fiction of an international and multi-racial assortment of men in pursuit of their Whale makes a profound latter-day study in "gospel cetology."

That several of the leading characters in *Moby Dick* have Quaker connections is not surprising, insofar as Nantucket Quakers were indeed prominent in the prospering whaling industry of the early and middle 1800's, and before that time. One of the earliest and most noteworthy accounts of Nantucket Quakerdom and whaling, by a sympathetic

outsider, is Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). The following two excerpts from that source may, by their curious contrast, furnish an appropriate backdrop for Melville's far more problematical anatomy of Quaker whaling.

As every sect, from their different modes of worship, and their different interpretations of some parts of the Scriptures, necessarily have various opinions and prejudices, which contribute something in forming their characters in society; so those of the Friends are well known: obedience to the laws, even to non-resistance, justice, goodwill to all, benevolence at home, sobriety, meekness, neatness, love of order, fondness and appetite for commerce. They are as remarkable here for those virtues as at Philadelphia, which is their American cradle, and the boast of that society.

Thus prepared they row in profound silence, leaving the whole conduct of the enterprise to the harpooner and to the steersman, attentively following their directions. When the former judges himself to be near enough to the whale, that is, at the distance of about fifteen feet, he bids them stop; perhaps she has a calf, whose safety attracts all the attention of the dam, which is favourable circumstance; perhaps she is of a dangerous species, and it is safest to retire, though their ardour will seldom permit them[!]; perhaps she is asleep, in that case he balances high the harpoon, trying in this important moment to collect all the energy of which he is capable. He launches it forth—she is struck: from her first movements they judge of



her temper, as well as of their future success. Sometimes in the immediate impulse of rage, she will attack the boat and demolish it with one stroke of her tail; in an instant the frail vehicle disappears and the assailants are immersed in the dreadful element. Were the whale armed with the jaws of a shark, and as voracious, they never would return home to amuse their listening wives with the interesting tale of the adventure[!]. At other times she will dive and disappear from human sight; and everything must give way to her velocity, or else all is lost. Sometimes she will swim away as if untouched, and draw the cord with such swiftness that it will set the edge of the boat on fire by the friction. If she rises before she has run out the whole length, she is looked upon as a sure prey. The blood she has lost in her flight, weakens her so much, that if she sinks again, it is but for a short time; the boat follows her course with almost equal speed. She soon re-appears; tired at last with convulsing the elements, which she tinges with her blood, she dies, and floats on the surface. At other times it may happen that she is not dangerously wounded, though she carries the harpoon fast in her body; when she will alternately dive and rise, and swim on with unabated vigour. She then soon reaches beyond the length of the cord, and carries the boat along with amazing velocity: this sudden impediment sometimes will retard her speed, at other times it only serves to rouse her anger, and to accelerate her progress. The harpooner, with the axe in his hand, stands ready. When he observes that the bows of the boat are greatly pulled down by

the diving whale, and that it begins to sink deep and to take much water, he brings the axe almost in contact with the cord; he pauses, still flattering himself that she will relax; but the moment grows critical, unavoidable danger approaches: sometimes men more intent on gain, than on the preservation of their lives, will run great risks; and it is wonderful how far these people have carried their daring courage at this awful moment! But it is vain to hope, their lives must be saved, the cord is cut, the boat rises again. If after thus getting loose, she re-appears, they will attack and wound her a second time. She soon dies, and when she is dead she is towed alongside of their vessel, where she is fastened.

(The foregoing excerpts are quoted from Letters V and VI respectively.) In *Moby Dick*, the Quaker intrusions stand not thus naively unrelated. However picturesque in themselves and grounded in the annals of New England whaling, they form an organic part of the total imaginative work so that they have become crucial to it. In other words, Melville probes not only the nature and the very existence of whales and of whale-hunting: he probes also, and unsparingly, the nature of Quakerism or rather of Quaker conduct, as if it epitomized much that is characteristic of Christianity and of civilization at large. He makes his captain-hero say of the solemn Quaker who is the chief mate: "Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind." His inquiry is ever a complex one, revolving around the mystery of the created world and the inter-related problem of what constitutes appropriate human be-

havior amidst the lands and oceans of reality. One is induced to follow him in sounding the depths and taking one's bearings anew, for, "unless you own the whale, you are but a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth."

## THE REALM OF THE NATURAL WORLD

*"Consider, once more, the universal  
cannibalism of the sea."*

Of man's ingenuity in appropriating, exploiting, converting the material resources of the world, Melville's *Moby Dick* takes ample note, even to the extracting of ambergris, "worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist," from the bowels of dyspeptic whales. The techniques, the applied science of whaling, are described in knowing detail, with an obvious pride in seasoned skill. But beyond that tribute to man's utilitarian astuteness, there are many chapters devoted to the study of animal life, and here the descriptions are linked now to a lyric awe, now to troubled doubt. The realm of nature presents itself as an enigma, only half exposed and known, with the known—from "the first howling gale" on—so curiously inconsistent in its workings that it seems dichotomized or utterly anarchic. To see the world in every sense as a sphere, to resolve the apparent contradictions and comprehend a unifying purpose, becomes thus an acute human need.

Like William Blake, in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Melville found the principles of "The Lamb" and "The Tiger" mysteriously, excruciatingly juxtaposed.



It is "the demonism in the world," "the tiger heart that pants beneath," that intrigued him beyond anything else. With savage humor Melville makes it clear that the seas, invested with congregations of sharks and swordfish, will not be converted into civil moderation by any combination of Christian preaching and damning. Thoreau was soon to describe in the "Brute Neighbors" chapter of *Walden* (1854) the mercilessly mutilating battle of two races of ants, extending his observations to the wars of men, and authentic examples of the brutish life-and-death struggle could of course easily be multiplied. The point, however, is simply that in the wasteful prolificness of the Life Force creatures do prey upon other creatures—"a shocking sharkish business enough for all parties." Melville does not fail to point at the common meat-market cannibalism, and to single out "thee, civilized and enlightened gourmand, who nailest geese to the ground and featest on their bloated livers in thy paté-de-foie-gras." In comical, tragic, perplexing ways, might—brute force—seems often right, being built into the natural world as at present constituted. That the life especially of so conscious and reflective an organism as man can be violently and painfully impaired, seems immoral, an intolerable predicament, from which in one way or another we must seek to escape. This is the supreme challenge of the riddled oceans of the world, traversed by monstrous miracles or miraculous monsters. The metaphysical direction of his quest is indeed clear long before Melville makes his narrator exclaim: "Jesu, what a whale! . . . would I could mount that whale and leap the topmost skies, to see whether the fabled heavens with all their countless tents really lie encamped beyond any mortal sight!" Out of a driving need

to understand the realm of the natural world as rounded, Melville has chosen Leviathan as his text for fullest possible exegesis.

## THE INSCRUTABLE CENTER

*"The mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable."*

If the root problem which Melville insists on tackling is that of Genesis, of what may be gathered about the ultimate reality through the workings of the creaturely world, there seem to be two avenues of approach. Man may, with Job-like patience and humility, trust in the wisdom of the total scheme yet to be discovered, or he may react against his trials and tribulations by an assertion of his powers, shaping the course of events in his own favor. Even that alternative can be conceived as an intended evolutionary response, in which man is elevated to the position of a good steward or co-partner with the universe. This view is tempting; the danger lies in the difficulty of knowing and observing the proper limitations of the human potential, of carefully avoiding mere ego-centered self-glorification. The holier-than-thou reformer, determined to rid the world of this or that evil, and the rebel-at-heart, in whom loss of faith has become a destructive urge, are in this sense brothers under the skin. The fierce, extinguishing blows they would strike betray a common conceit. We shall see these types combined in Melville's Captain Ahab, who manages both their faces with the selfsame effect.

Meanwhile it must even be as the quoted *New England Primer* rhymed it:

Whales in the sea  
God's voice obey.

And not merely whales. With what reasonable motivation? "That one portentous something in the picture's midst . . . once found out, and all the rest were plain." But we cannot confront the maker of things directly, are prevented from questioning or quarreling with whatever principal there may be, and yet his mysterious identity intrigues us so that we would assault and conquer it. To the impassioned worshiper Melville's *Moby Dick* carries home the costly realization that one cannot hunt down and *harpoon* the meaning of life, one cannot *slay* it. The whale—his physiognomy a sphinx, his brain a circle impossible to encompass or to square—swims on, mistifying (respell it if you will)! The imagined and almost certain center remains forever inscrutable.

Where then does his less-than-omniscient status leave the small arc of a man in Melville's panorama? Not utterly unrelated, but in a series of instructive paradoxes.

**CAPTAIN PELEG AND CAPTAIN BILDAD:  
CO-OWNERS, LICENSED PILOTS, QUAKERS**

*"Ex officio professors of Sabbath breaking  
are all whalemén."*

There is, first, the paradox of the Nantucketers Peleg and Bildad, more Quakerish than Quaker, who as "the two principal and responsible owners" launch the *Pequod* (the Algonquian means *Destroyer*, and the ship is in fact "a



cannibal of a craft") on its whalehunting voyage. The difference between stout, gruff, excitable Peleg and the lanky, pietistic Bildad (whom Peleg assails as "ye canting, drab-colored son of a wooden gun") is merely a difference in degree, or in temperament. Both, being old whalemens themselves, cannot be unaware of, though they prove practically unconcerned about, the cruel means to be employed and the nightmarish ends to be pursued. Peleg himself asserts: "No harpooner is worth a straw who aint pretty sharkish. There was young Nat Swaine, once the bravest boat-header out of all Nantucket and the Vineyard; he joined the meeting, and never came to good." Was it then these Quaker whalers' altruistic purpose to supply mankind with illuminating oil and spermaceti candles (to say nothing of whalebone), and must one grant that "the pains and penalties of whaling" were the only or the most efficient means of supplying that craving for external light? Or were these untrembling men lured by the great fortunes to be made as they went out of their way to conduct unprovoked, brutal war upon the Biblical creatures of the deep? Melville sardonically remarks: "Pity there was none . . . he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merrymakings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all." No, Peleg and Bildad, and "friend Starbuck" along with them, have calculated a path to profit, to be "harpooned and dragged up from the sea," and though their motto may well be "duty and profit hand in hand," they have failed to take into account that every whale hunt—even when it begins on Christmas Day and is routed around the Cape of Good Hope—is at bottom an

irreligious pursuit of *Moby Dick*. The mere fact of Quaker whaling argues an obtuse and hollow belief. "Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois."

Note that drab-coated, broad-brimmed, thee-thouing Bildad is named after one of the false comforters of Job. Characteristically he reminds the harpooners that "good white cedar plank is raised full three per cent within the year," before he urges them not to forget their prayers. Bildad is indeed "suspected to have got himself made a pilot in order to save the Nantucket pilot-fee to all the ships he was concerned in, for he never piloted any other craft." An overruling money-mindedness to the last shadows his compromising: "Don't whale it too much a' Lord's days, men; but don't miss a fair chance either. . . ." How sadly ironical then for him to admonish: "Thou beliest thine own heart, Peleg"! And it must be added that Bildad's sister, Aunt Charity, similarly figures as an inconsistent palliator. She provided ginger and bade the steward "never [to] give the harpooneers any spirits, but only this ginger-jub—so she called it." Her gingerly temperance, far from being appreciated, ends up overboard. The charitable bustling about of "this excellent hearted Quakeress" is also deflated by Melville's punctuating a paragraph devoted to her with the observation that "she herself owned a score or two of well-saved dollars" in the *Pequod* enterprise. Moreover, having placed a hymnal in each seaman's berth, on the last day before the ship's departure she comes on board "with a long oil-ladle in one hand, and a still longer whaling lance in the other," a sight which Melville describes pointedly as "startling to see."

Melville's strictures concerning mid-nineteenth-century

Nantucket Quakerdom are perhaps best summarized by his observation that Quaker peculiarities are there "variously and anomalously modified by things altogether alien and heterogeneous. For some of these same Quakers are the most sanguinary of all sailors and whale-hunters. They are fighting Quakers; they are Quakers with a vengeance." He wonders how Bible-studying, stingy old Bildad, in particular, could possibly reconcile his conscientious objection to military service with his invasion of the oceans to spill "tuns upon tuns of leviathan gore." It is not a flattering supposition that strict religiosity and a hard-hearted dividend-practicalness were lodged in him as only the most nominal of neighbors, avoiding the unpleasantness of a good look at each other; and it is a bitterly effective demonstration of sanctimoniousness with which Melville follows this suggestion home. Of course, he exaggerates the Quaker hardness, shrewdness, parsimony, and double-dealing of a generation long gone by, but that concession may still leave ample cause for a moral and religious uneasiness among us moderns.

## AHAB: THE PEQUOD'S CAPTAIN AND MONOMANIAC

*"There is a wisdom that is woe;  
but there is a woe that is madness."*

By the "flukes and flames" twists of their self-contradictory Quakerism, Peleg and Bildad prepare the stage for the *Pequod's* fateful captain, whose name recalls that King of Israel who abandoned Jehovah for the false worship of



Baal, as the second paradox. "A great lord of Leviathans was Ahab"—or so he imagined and had succeeded in making others agree. He describes his life thus: "Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep!" In the eyes of Peleg, who seeks to persuade himself as much as Ishmael that he knows Ahab well, he is "not a pious, good man, like Bildad, but a swearing good man—something like me—only there's a good deal more of him," so much more indeed that he amounts to a "grand, ungodly, god-like" man. (Note that Peleg surrounds and submerges his awareness of infidelity with terms of admiration. We have indeed elsewhere intriguing references by Melville to the "Devil as a Quaker" and to a "Society of D's.") If it can be assumed that Ahab, too, had his roots in Quakerism, as Melville chose to hint in Chapter XVI but never to establish beyond question, then he has come to espouse an untrembling apostasy. Whatever the reasons and un-reasons of his Quaker employers, who conveniently passed over the abnormalities in Ahab's condition, he harbored his one desperate purpose, finally admitting: "What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prattling to me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience." Their calculating callousness has in him been accentuated into full-blown hatred of the White Whale, "the white fiend," whose aroused self-defense he had rationalized as representing an intangible malignity. And so, like many a dictator obsessed with the notion of world conquest, "crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast

hunter," launches himself and countless unsuspecting victims along an inglorious path to uncharted death.

The sheer dominance of this sea-borne tyrant—Melville characterizes it as "an irresistible dictatorship"—is a frightening phenomenon. He maneuvers his appearances on deck most dexterously, and is his own propaganda minister—persuading, insinuating, promising, and threatening, by quick turns. "Down, men! the first thing that but offers to jump from this boat I stand in, that thing I harpoon. Ye are not other men, but my arms and legs; and so obey me." Confronted by such a ruthless determination, even the deeply opposed Starbuck is willy-nilly reduced to an obedient tool. But the influence of Ahab works more insidiously where it works more subtly. His craze is like an infectious disease, so potent that in the course of the voyage it becomes suffused and all but generalized among the crew. He produces the same kind of social frenzy or mass hysteria of which recent history has given us shockingly convincing examples.

The secret of Ahab's hold over others lies in the fierce single-mindedness of his arrogant mission: he is the witch-hunter *par excellence* who will pursue and utterly destroy what he conceives to be the Evil Incarnate. With the odd world thus challenged, if not rectified, man would assume a new dignity. "Ho, ho! all ye nations before my prow, I bring the sun to ye!" It is of no avail that Ahab is told by a namesake of Gabriel, who pronounces the White Whale an incarnation of the Divine, to "beware of the blasphemer's end!" The judgment soon to overtake him is to that extent of his own making. And no vital truth is apprehended by means of his cursing crusade except this postmortem one: that man may, physically as well as mentally, be over-

whelmed by the very violence with which he still seeks to extinguish the demon phantom of an arch enemy. William Penn's doctrine of "No Cross, No Crown" would have been lost on so stubborn a pride as this physical-metaphysical sufferer's. Yet, *there* are the reasons to pity Ahab's case, for it is by the double weight of his dead, ivory leg that he has been transformed into a thought-tormented outcast, "gnarled and knotted with wrinkles," a canker in his soul, "more a demon than a man!" His defiance, "his fatal pride," is more accurately a "haughty agony." He himself says, with awful significance: "Ahab's soul's a centipede, that moves upon a hundred legs."

In his wild protest against the unfathomable suffering of humankind, Ahab stands for all those who, by a chain of factors often so complicated that they are difficult to isolate and correct, have been maimed, not merely in body, but more in spirit, and in whom the pain, the distress, the frustration—the grinding consciousness of a particular loss—has been hardened into a fanatical antagonism. Not only does their misfortune, as Melville observes, makes them fly into diabolical passions sometimes: they have foresworn the brotherhood of men and the fatherhood of God. Says Ahab, projecting his predicament: "I am impatient of all misery in others that is not mad." He seems indeed to resent the more fortunate lot of others so intensely, if deviously, that he must drag them down with him to a common doom. Yes, "human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing." We can only guess how far the fallen Ahab is from being deterred by the reasoning of Captain Boomer, who has himself lost an arm to Moby Dick: "Ain't one limb enough? . . . No more white whales for me." That he

cannot bring himself to leave bad enough alone has its maze of nervous justifications; he pursues the hated whale in his troubled sleep as in his brooding wakefulness, and it remains for modern psychology to puzzle over a cure.

Still other questions are raised by Captain Ahab's specialized monomania. These two suggest themselves most readily: what is behind our fascination with the sensational and the terrible, and what is behind the lure of distant sea adventures? Perhaps Ahab symbolizes the much more general undercurrent of man's destructive drive, so well understood by Melville's friend Hawthorne, who wrote in "The Haunted Mind": "In the depths of every heart there is a tomb and a dungeon, though the lights, the music, and revelry above may cause us to forget their existence, and the buried ones, or prisoners whom they hide." This thief in the night, haunting all princely prosperity with utter annihilation, is also the theme of Poe's too superficially read "The Masque of the Red Death." Ahab's furious circumnavigating, however, recalls the comment in Emerson's "Self-Reliance" that "the rage of travelling is a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action." There appear to be Ahab elements in the systems of normal beings which are hardly suspected, have never been reached and converted, and tend by ill-favored vicissitudes to make floating islands of us, in the currents of the unknown.

The ex-seaman preacher Edward Taylor, one of the prototypes of Melville's Father Mapple, had impressed Emerson (himself conscious of the phenomenon of an infuriated white whale) with the injunction: "May every deck be stamped by the hallowed feet of godly captains, and the



first watch and the second watch be watchful for the Divine light." Ahab is emphatically not one of those devout shipmasters, but the "unsunderable wilfulness" of his dark and proud faith remains subject to quite opposite yearnings. He is lured by a Pacific radiance as by the vision of human happiness, and suffers terribly to find them so evanescent and deceiving. Far more tentatively and excruciatingly than Peleg must have supposed, "Ahab has his humanities." When he turns, for brief moments, confidently to his chief mate, it is as to his other, defeated and forsaken self, to his opposite pole, and the tangled relations between the two men accentuate the tragic failure of each.

## STARBUCK: THE PEQUOD'S CHIEF MATE AND QUAKER CONSCIENCE

*"But Starbuck looked away."*

The third paradox is that of the "humane" Starbuck, a Quaker with a conscience, caught up in the whaling-mad dictatorship of the *Pequod's* captain. Melville devotes a loving chapter to his description, in which he strives to define Starbuck's failure *vis-a-vis* Ahab partly as the result of quite honorable, softening influences upon "the original ruggedness of his nature," partly as a constitutional limitation. Though the opening sentence of the chapter characterizes him as "a Quaker by descent," Starbuck is apparently not afflicted with the spiritual anemia of birthrightism so marked in both the accommodating Peleg and the formal Bildad. On the contrary, Melville credits him with a deep natural reverence, uncommon conscientiousness, and stead-

fastness. But, somewhat like Billy Budd, he cannot outtalk and outface his mutilated and mightily enraged superior—it is as simple and as complicated and as tragic as that!

At best Starbuck is a principled dissenter, at worst a mere would-do. Both his superiority and his inferiority are hinted in terming him “almost the one only man who had ever ventured to oppose him [i.e. Ahab] with anything in the slightest approaching to decision.” His ineffectualness reminds one of Emerson’s dictum: “Your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none.” Though Starbuck foresees that the sum total of Ahab’s and the *Pequod’s* fierce voyaging must at last be but “one little heap of ashes,” he does not manage to dissociate himself decisively from the feverish futility, and all of his tentative protests come to nothing. The crew at large he can inspire to a moment’s half-mutinous outcry, and those immediately under his care he can exhort, “clutch your souls, now!” But this aptly named Starbuck (the name is prominent in Nantucket history), this chief exponent of heavenly influences bucking the ill-starred voyage of vengeance, succumbs ingloriously and cooperates in Ahab’s enterprise. His is clearly not the power of George Fox’s ocean of light flowing over the ocean of darkness. He looks down deep and does believe, yet his faith is not dynamic enough to oust the facts at hand.

Melville circumvents the question of Starbuck’s complete abasement and ignominy. It may of course be argued that Starbuck’s moral vision has never been 20-20. He cannot see that every whale hunt—and he has been in the forefront of many—amounts to a bloody instance of ungodliness. The other half of his habitual prudence is stark in-

sensitivity: "I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs." Now, however, he is against his better judgment actively involved in a singularly unreasonable, monstrous whaling expedition, and so—doubly implicated—he is not permitted to survive the idolatrous undertaking. One may argue that way, and argue well, but not without acknowledging that Starbuck seeks continually to assert his better insight under the most difficult circumstances. His lone opposition is indeed of such enormous importance that Melville's book may be read as a battle of wits between the Quaker-minded chief mate and the demoniac captain, with the entire world as the prize, and Starbuck's—more conclusively than Ahab's—the major self-divided tragedy. So it is worth following the Starbuck-Ahab conflict through its various, grueling stages to those questions which express the continuing concern of civilized humanity as they finally do the chief mate's: "Is this the end of all my bursting prayers? all my life-long fidelities?"

However much Starbuck must be found wanting, before the entire ship's company he courageously protests Ahab's strategic announcement that they have shipped to hunt down Moby Dick, the captain's mutilator: "I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance" (Chapter XXXVI). Without support from among the crew, and under the barrage of Ahab's volubleness, he is for the present defeated into tacit acquiescence, hoping that time and tide may prevent his mad overlord from accomplishing the proclaimed purpose, and that his own humanity may yet somehow outfight the horrid old man, whom he pities. As he views the same globe-image of a gold doubloon in

which Ahab has just seen his stormy self mirrored, Starbuck clings to the belief that "in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope." Ahab, for his part, realizes that he has merely succeeded in coercing the chief mate's will and must continue to keep "his magnet at Starbuck's brain" to guard against a likely defection or active opposition.

There follows an ominously dramatic moment when Ahab and Starbuck confront each other in the cabin over the matter of oil-leakage in the *Pequod's* hold (Chapter CIX). They do not speak the same language, and they do not live by the same concerns, and the basic dichotomy is immeasurably sharpened.

"Devils! Dost thou then so much as dare to critically think of me?—On deck!"

"Nay, sir, not yet; I do entreat. And I do dare, sir—to be forbearing! Shall we not understand each other better than hitherto, Captain Ahab?"

Ahab seized a loaded musket from the rack (forming part of most South-Sea-men's cabin furniture), and pointing it towards Starbuck, exclaimed: "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the *Pequod*.—On deck!"

That, throughout, Starbuck labors to preserve a respectful half-heartedness, is not lost on Ahab. There is courage in the chief mate, and enormous self-control mixed with humaneness; he warns the captain to beware of himself. As Ahab, for reasons of his own, proceeds to reverse his initial decision and agrees to the hoisting of the leaking casks, he



appears to have sized his challenger up in his ambivalent apostrophe: "Thou art but too good a fellow, Starbuck."

Later, Starbuck grasps Ahab by the arm: "God, God is against thee, old man; forbear! 't is an ill voyage! ill begun, ill continued; let me square the yards, while we may, old man, and make a fair wind of it homewards, to go on a better voyage than this." It is, however, by now a foregone conclusion that Ahab will not thus be reasoned with, and he reacts again with angry, terrorizing threats. Starbuck comes back once more with a pleading: "Sir?—in God's name!—sir?" To which Ahab responds merely, quite unmoved and certain of the preponderant weight of his defiant personality: "Well."

Outraged and exasperated, the chief mate is driven to consider desperate measures (Chapter CXXIII). "Not reasoning; not remonstrance; not entreaty wilt thou hearken to," he soliloquizes, and slowly, slowly levels at the head of the captain sleeping in his stateroom the very musket which had been so tyrannically pointed at himself. But Starbuck cannot act upon impulse; he is the Hamlet of Quakerism; he must think, consider, weigh, query, be principled, delay. "But shall this crazed old man be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship's company down to doom with him? . . . Great God, where art thou? Shall I? shall I?" Here Starbuck is one with the Psalmist and with Christ crucified, at the ninth hour: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" Here the Quaker part of mankind is wrestling with the spirit and deciding, for good or for ill, against the "death-tube" as an instrument in human relations. Against the bare charge of ir-

resolution, Melville comes to Starbuck's defense by commenting: "Starbuck was an honest, upright man; but out of Starbuck's heart, at that instant when he saw the muskets, there strangely evolved an evil thought; but so blent with its neutral or good accompaniments that for the instant he hardly knew it for itself."

And as sky and sea merging at the horizon, so Starbuck and Ahab remain interconnected to the last (Chapter CXXXII). We are told that Starbuck "seemed to hear in his own true heart the measureless sobbing that stole out of the centre of the serenity around," and as he draws near, he becomes Ahab's brother-confessor, his other, submerged hemisphere: "Oh, Starbuck! it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky . . . stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye. . . ." And yet, though Ahab describes himself as "a forty years' fool" and beseeches Starbuck to "stay on board, on board!—lower not when I do," and though the chief mate addresses his captain as a "noble soul! grand old heart, after all!," the essential dichotomy of purposes is only intensified. In vain are all reminders of human kinship, in vain is the plea to change the disastrous course. The tragedy of Starbuck's "mild blue" Quakerism is now so clear even to him that he is "blanched to a corpse's hue with despair."

When, on the second day of the final, fateful chase, Starbuck once more appeals to Ahab to forsake his "devil's madness," the earlier profusion of exclamation marks has given way to defeatist question marks. Ahab acknowledges, "Starbuck, of late I've felt strangely moved to thee," only to command: "But in this matter of the whale, be the front of thy face to me as the palm of this hand—a lipless, un-

featured blank." It is a devastatingly face-slapping mode of speaking. Reduced to impotence, Starbuck continues to cling to the hope that the monomaniac impiety of this whale hunt might be checked by Divine intercession, as he exclaims: "Great God! but for one single instant show thyself." His only reward is to be called fool and underling by the immovable captain.

And on the third day, again doing Ahab's bidding, Starbuck has momentarily come to muffle his superior insight to an innocuous: "I misdoubt me [i.e. suspect] that I disobey my God in obeying him." But it is Starbuck, and only Starbuck, with whom Ahab stops to shake hands in an excruciating farewell. "Their hands met; their eyes fastened; Starbuck's tears the glue." The chief mate, moved to still another appeal to his captain's innate nobility, says rightly: "It's a brave man that weeps; how great the agony of the persuasion then!" At last it seems Ahab's perversity has even calculated this cycle of sparing and arousing and crushing that conscientious objector so aptly named Starbuck, whose life ends in the *Götterdämmerung* of the "death-glorious ship" with a pathetic burst of futile rhetoric: "Stir thyself, Starbuck!—stave it off—move, move! speak aloud! . . . Oh! Ahab, not too late is it, even now, the third day, to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!"

Melville told Hawthorne: "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb." No more wicked and little less lamb-like than the New Testament is *Moby Dick*, with the *Pequod* finally a Golgotha symbol. Starbuck is the human counterpart of the taunting, fluttering, archangelically shrieking sky-hawk—"a living part of heaven"—held

captive by the nailing force of a hammer to the main-mast-head, between the two lesser ones, as the Satanic ship sinks into its hellish waters. In his own whaling way, Melville was vividly retelling the Gospels in the experienced context of his century. So it is a profoundly pathetic and stirring book, with the accent on Starbuck as a failure rather than as a sacrifice, leaving the modern reader with several important queries. How can good assert itself in a human world gone astray? Must it forever be crucified—drowned, shot, gas-chambered, or atom-bombed—by its own limitations? Must we subscribe to the dire implications of Melville's phrase, "the choice hidden handful of the Divine Inert"? Are we really making it our business to speak and act effectually to the conditions of twentieth-century men roaming the multitudinous seas with dubious and dangerous purposes?—Not Ahab's whirlpool insanity alone gives *Moby Dick* its tragic scope; shockingly tragic is the impotence of the Quaker objector who, against his better judgment, proceeds to aid and abet the hell-bent captain to the point of securing him in his final lookout. Says Ahab confidently: "Take the rope, sir—I give it into thy hands, Starbuck."

### ISHMAEL: A SIMPLE SAILOR AND COMMENTATOR

*"Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale!"*

There remains the paradox of Ishmael, who alone survives the catastrophic ordeal. Technically he serves Melville as an authentic spokesman to relate the case of the wrecked



*Pequod*, with all the twists and turns involved in "the black tragedy of the melancholy ship." At the same time there is, by his all-seeing detachment, also poetic justice in singling him out to be rescued. For, though he too has been sworn to the mad cause of supernatural revenge, more than Starbuck or anyone else aboard he has managed to resist the hypnotic spell of Ahab, being a shrewd observer of, rather than a participant in, the insanely destructive activity. Says he: "Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others." Thus, "floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it," he comes closest to being a practitioner of the Biblical injunction—"be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." He was indeed forewarned by Father Mapple's sermon, which dwelt upon the "pregnant lesson" of Jonah's wilful impiety and repentance, as by the dire hints of an insistent stranger appropriately named Elijah, warnings renewed many times over by the reports of ships which the *Pequod* encounters.

"Born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church," Ishmael dissociates himself from that orthodoxy of beliefs "never bottomed on the earth," and reasons that "to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me—*that* is the will of God." It is symptomatic of his winning innocence that he survived unharmed that first night away from home when the stranger forced upon him as his bedfellow turned out to be the politest of tomahawk-piped cannibals, soon to become a fast friend, "my dear comrade and twin-brother." Note that Ishmael belongs to the same whaleboat of which that guileless heathen, Queequeg, is the steerer-harpooner and Starbuck the heads-

man; his center is rightly between this bow and that stern. That Melville introduces his narrator at the very beginning of the first chapter with the words "Call me Ishmael," suggests that both the phrasing and the Biblical source of the name were adapted by him from Hawthorne's Quaker story, "The Gentle Boy," in which attention is called to "the outlandish name" of the innocent child victim who replies: "They call me Ibrahim"—a passage marked by Melville in his copy of *Twice-Told Tales*. But one can only speculate whether Melville intended Ishmael, who sees Ahab "morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck," as something of a Quaker better than the chief mate. Ishmael is certainly conscious of the surpassing glory of the White Whale "as he so divinely swam." He has "the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness," and he appeals to others: "Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole." These may well be reflections of a philosophical prudence, and not strictly the promptings of the Inner Light.

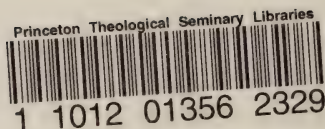
Yet Ishmael realizes clearly that he is, for ill as for good, so involved in mankind that "another's mistakes or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death." One must then not read too much assurance into the words of Job's messengers which Melville employs as a motto for the Ishmael "Epilogue": "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." Among the multitudinous mischances, life is a precarious business for one and for all. More than that, Ishmael-Melville opines: "That

mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. With books the same.”

The small arcs of Peleg and Bildad, Ahab and Starbuck, and even of Ishmael, make but a broken chain. Each of these fragments provides us with lessons that jolt. There is, however, in the rescue of the *Pequod's* lone survivor, a parable of the unbroken circle of humanity. One must recall that the captain of the symbolically named *Rachel* had asked the *Pequod* to join in the quest for a missing boat, and that Ahab had resolutely refused the plea of his Nantucket acquaintance, Captain Gardiner, to help search for and perhaps recover his lost twelve-year-old son. “Who ever heard of two pious whaling-ships cruising after one missing whale-boat in the height of the whaling season?” Though Ahab gave the impression of finding it hard not to respond more favorably to the reminder of his own child, safely at home, he gave nothing else; and there was no indication that Quaker Starbuck showed on that occasion the concern of the Good Samaritan. Unheeded went Captain Gardiner’s insistent: “Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case,” with its dramatic accentuation of Ishmael’s much earlier statement as to God’s will. Yet the man thus refused and declared a stranger demonstrates nevertheless his own sea-neighborliness and sea-charity when he, in turn, rescues the *Pequod's* Ishmael. It is an action which hints, by the obliqueness of the book’s last sentence, that it behooves the loser and the lost to be to each other as brother’s keepers. Melville had previously, in connection with his discussion of Starbuck’s weakness, made Ishmael assert “that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates

without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!" In so doing, he reaffirmed in the broadest sense the age-old faith in the possibility of a society of friends. To the end of such a world "upheld by the veracity of good men" (an Emersonian phrase), *Moby Dick* is a demand, not for any posture of belief, but for daring acts of confirmation; not for this or that ingenious theory about the ideal, but for proofs of a sturdy and converting love.

Into his fictional whale-boned temple Melville invites the reader, adding that "if you be a Nantucketer, and a whaleman, you will silently worship there."





Some important Melville studies are: Raymond M. Weaver, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* (New York, Doran, 1921); William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* (Duke University Press, 1943); William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Harvard University Press, 1944); Richard Volney Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York, Macmillan, 1949); Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1949); Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York, Sloane, 1950); M. O. Percival, *A Reading of Moby-Dick* (University of Chicago Press, 1950); Leon Howard, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (University of California Press, 1951); Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 2 volumes; and Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton University Press, 1952).—One previous attempt to view *Moby Dick* in the light of Quakerism is William Hubben's "Ahab, the Whaling Quaker," *The Friends Quarterly* (London), 3 (July 1949), 169-181.

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